

HOW MONKS SHAPED THE LANDSCAPE OF MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Rievaulx Abbey, founded in 1132, was the first Cistercian abbey to be established in the north of England. It quickly became one of the most powerful and spiritually renowned centres of monasticism in Britain, housing a 650-strong community at its peak in the 1160s under its most famous abbot, Aelred. The Abbey's original 1000 acres of land was given to the monks' in 1132 by Walter Espec, a nobleman. In 1145, just thirteen years after the abbey was founded, more than 300 men lived on the grounds. Rievaulx slowly expanded its lands with gifts from local benefactors who wanted to do good works, associate themselves with the abbey and the monks' virtuous reputation and secure a place in the afterlife. The Cistercians were able to build up massive estates through the power of patronage. Monastic lands were the best farmed in the country and their patrons knew this. Rievaulx's membership steadily grew, such that at its peak in the 1160's, it was home to more than 600 men which was made up of about 140 choir monks and 500 lay brothers and laymen who worked the agricultural lands, oversaw livestock and engaged in industries such as tanning and ironworking. The lay brothers took vows of obedience to the abbot. Choir monks were required to be literate, lay brothers were illiterate, as was about 93% of the general population. For hundreds of years, the abbeys were the dominant religious, economic and political force in northern Britain, particularly in Yorkshire. In the 1130's with the arrival of the Cistercians at Rievaulx, the sudden flowering of many other abbeys, and with landowners clamouring to donate land and property, they suddenly were the linchpins to rapid economic development in Yorkshire and elsewhere. In fact monasteries were in possession of more than one-fifth of the land in England. Much of the country's politics and administration, as well as international affairs were controlled by the Church. The Kings relied on powerful abbots,

as well as bishops and archbishops to maintain control of the country.

Because the monasteries were reminders of the Catholic Church that had opposed Henry regarding his divorce, he dissolved the country's 843 monasteries belonging to all orders and confiscated their very valuable possessions. The abbeys were shuttered and largely abandoned, and many buildings that had stood for centuries were destroyed. People sometimes see abbeys as just being places of seclusion and quiet prayer but in their heyday they would have more resembled an industrial estate with the religious side going on in parallel. The Reformation which was reluctantly imposed on the people did no favours to the Catholic Church in England, the effects of which are felt to this day.

Abbeys were composed of a walled inner precinct covering 92 acres in which livestock was kept and where industrial areas and agricultural buildings were located. A central tenet of Cistercian monasticism was self-sufficiency. To achieve this Rievaulx operated a mill, a tannery, a brewery, a vineyard, a bakery, a fishery, mines, quarries and textile-making facilities. There were also ample orchards and gardens to sustain the monks, who ate an almost entirely vegetarian diet. Beyond that there was an outer precinct for farming and industrial activities such as ironworking. And even farther out there were at least 20 granges, large farmsteads that ranged from 300 to 500 acres that stretched over many miles, most of which were dedicated to raising sheep and producing wool. Many prominent historians are now saying that the Industrial Revolution would have begun a century earlier if the monasteries had not been dissolved by Henry. The woollen industry in Yorkshire was started by the monks, so also was lead and iron smelting in the Sheffield area. The monks were exporting large quantities of wool to Europe. And of course they were also famous for their land reclamation and advanced farming methods. The ordinary people were very proud of their many monasteries. After

Henry's break with the Catholic Church, the Pilgrimage of Grace was a protest against the closure of the monasteries. Most of the leaders were executed.

The inner precinct of the monastery was divided into inner and outer courts, the inner for the choir monks and the outer for the lay brothers with a gatehouse controlling access. The church too, was divided this way with the eastern section reserved for choir monks and western part for the lay brothers.

Given the industrial scale of manufacturing and agricultural production at the abbeys, water management was critical to monks' success as water was their only source of power. The often diverted rivers to access this water source. In 1279, Rievaulx had 14000 sheep but the next year disease decimated the flocks and the abbey declared bankruptcy. In 1301 there were only 30 lay brothers left. The Black Death also had a devastating effect on the abbey curtailing the number of entrants. Rievaulx's end came on December 3rd 1538, four hundred years after it was founded. However, the impact of the abbeys on medieval society is beyond question. So much about Rievaulx Abbey.

Fountains Abbey, founded in 1132 became the second Cistercian Abbey in the North of England. Within a decade it had become a colonizing monastery and founded eight others. Over the first century of its existence Fountains grew to be one of the largest Cistercian monasteries in England. The cloister covered two acres, the total walled precinct was around 70 acres by the early sixteenth century. At the peak of its popularity in the first half of the thirteenth century, Fountains was home to 600 or 700 men about 160 choir monks and the rest lay brothers and laymen. As at Rievaulx, at Fountains the men engaged in various industries on a grand scale, smelting lead and iron, quarrying stone, hunting, brewing beer, tending bees and baking bread. Wool production was especially lucrative and wool was in high demand for the monks' habits.

The lay brothers wore leather clothing. Fountains was really a good-size medieval town and as industrialized a space as any in England at this point. The Fountains tannery was the largest in any monastic settlement in England. A very large tannery reflects the productivity of the huge herds of livestock the abbey acquired and managed.

The monastic period (400 years) was a time of enormous economic expansion and the monks and abbeys were very much leading the way.